

The Best Laid Plans

I imagine the arrival of the black plague was greeted with about the same amount of blah as the first gaggle of surveyors that arrived in Witton Park on that crisp May morning. I remember it so well because as I was on my way to school Jennifer Mountjoy's mother called me over and asked me to take her daughter along. I could have died.

Mrs. Mountjoy had just moved to the village to take care of her sick aunt, Mrs. Bell. I had never seen old Mrs. Bell as she had been bed-ridden since time out of mind. To me she existed only as a phantom behind the permanently drawn drapes of the downstairs window at number six High Thompson Street. She was a source of dread to kids on our street, and the very last thing you wanted to do was go into that dim house that always smelled of eucalyptus.

"Hello, Philip," said Mrs. Mountjoy. "Jennifer is almost ready and I'd be very glad if you would take her to school this week till she knows her way around." It probably never occurred to her that her daughter was a girl. And I was a boy. Was she mad or something? I absolutely could not do this thing.

"O.K.," I said.

"Come in to the warm," she said.

"Crikey... I mean, er, no thanks. I'll just wait here if that's all right."

"I'll give you a slice of toast an' jam while you wait." What a dilemma. And how cruel to make a kid choose between the evil eye and a slab of jammy toast. Mrs. Mountjoy disappeared for a minute and came back with a hefty doorstep of freshly toasted bread veritably dripping with raspberry jam. No contest.

"Ta, Missus." And I was across the threshold like something bewitched. Mrs. Mountjoy went off to get Jennifer ready and as I polished off the toast I looked around. I was surprised to find the inside of the house structured exactly like my own. Old Mrs. Bell had photographs all over the hallway and a flight of plaster ducks was on its perpetual migration up the stairwell. The pictures were all of grim-looking people with ne'er a smile between them. The men all had beards and the women wore pinched expressions. I wondered how anyone could ever have loved them enough to put their pictures on the wall. Maybe they were there to frighten children. In which case they were good pictures. The most remarkable of the photos was just inside the front room, where the invalid lay in wait for me. It had been purposefully placed there, I thought, to lure innocents to their doom. It was an image of Mr. Bell, dead since the battle of the Somme in the Great War. One of the poplar trees at the south of the village had been planted in his memory. Mrs. Bell would have the double misfortune of living long enough to see the tree destroyed with almost the same disregard that had swept her man from the earth. In the picture he was regaled in all the paraphernalia of regimental splendour - dress uniform with tons of buttons and lanyards hanging everywhere. He stood at the 'stand easy' mode with a rifle at his side and what looked like hand grenades of some kind around his belt. All wonderful stuff for giving what-for to troublesome natives around the empire. What a shock it must have been to take on the Hun and find out the buggers fought back. Show-stopping though the uniform was, it was Mr. Bell himself

that was most fascinating. He was a massive man. Taller than his horse, he dwarfed everything in the photograph. His chest was wide enough to bear the medals of a hundred campaigns, and it did. His neck was a wondrous thing to behold and spilled over the stiff collar with muscle to spare. And his moustache was waxed into wings that even Lord Kitchener would have envied.

“Come in, young man,” said a tiny clear voice. Ice formed on the back of my neck and I considered making a run for it. But a morbid curiosity forced me to look around and into the eyes of Mrs. Bell. She looked exactly like Miss Havesham in *Great Expectations*. I know, because I saw the movie at the picture-house three weeks earlier.

“I’ll not bite you,” she said, but I wasn’t sure. And neither was I sure what it actually was that she did to kids, except that it must be pretty awful because Jack always opened his eyes really wide when he talked about her — “Mrs. Bell lives in the dark.” — how could you not have the willies after that?

“Would you like a mint imperial?” she said. Several things crossed my mind, like is it poisoned... are there pins in it... has she had it in her mouth already? But of course I had zero in the way of self-discipline and my hand went out towards her as I watched in horror. She slipped me a mint and I placed it in on my tongue and kissed my life goodbye. After I didn’t die I became relatively comfortable with the situation and found to my pleasure that the old lady was quite nice. When she laughed she showed pink gums and a slight wheeze in her giggle reminded me of my own granny. From somewhere under the bedding she produced two more crumpled paper bags and held one in either hand.

“Dainty Dinah? Black bullet?” she offered. I crunched the mint in my mouth and went for one of each. The black bullets were stuck together and I was a bit embarrassed that a lump of about six came out.

“That’s all right,” she said. “Dainty Dinah?” They were a particular favourite of mine and my mother used them to bribe me on occasion. I’d do almost anything to get one of these toffees. And here was Mrs. Bell giving me one for nothing. I was suspicious, but not enough to put me off.

“Ta, missus.” And I slipped the goodies into my pocket so that I could pull them out later, smack my lips before dropping them into my mouth one at a time, and thereby torture the kids at school. The old woman pulled the quilt closer about herself and smiled like a little girl. She looked me up and down just as I examined her. I’d never seen a bed cap, except in pictures. Hers was made of lace, exquisitely embroidered with tiny posies of fanciful flowers. Her hands were small like a child’s and I couldn’t make out the outline of a body at all under the white linen nightgown. If it wasn’t for her wrinkled face, you’d think she was about nine years old.

“What’s your name?”

“Philip.”

“And where do you live, Philip?”

“King Street. Number nineteen.”

She got this vacant look in her eyes and was quiet for a while. I could hear the clock out in the hall marking time with its painfully slow ticking. I wondered what was taking Mrs. Mountjoy so long to get Jennifer ready and who Dainty Dinahs were named after.

"Have you always lived there?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes," I said. "Except for when I was born in Sedgefield. I lived in the hospital for a week." She smiled and I smiled with her. I told her that we'd be moving to Newton Aycliffe when the houses came down, and that by coincidence today the men from the council were walking around with telescopes on poles, writing things in books as they went. I told her that my dad had said we'd all have to move away and how he was pretty mad about that 'cos they never asked his opinion and who did these little Hitlers think they were anyway.

"Now then, Philip," said Mrs. Mountjoy who had come into the room with Jennifer. "Mother doesn't want to hear that kind of talk. Here's Jennifer. Off you go!" And she bustled the pair of us outside in somewhat of a hurry. I turned to say goodbye but she just tutted and closed the door on us.

"What did I do?" I said.

"You mustn't talk to Gran about the house," said Jennifer. "She cries when she sees the letter from the council and Mam sez she'll not be coming to Canada with us."

"You're going to Canada, not Aycliffe?"

"Yes."

"Where'll she go, then?"

"She's going to a home in Sunderland. Nuns will look after her, Mam sez. She'll like that. She a bit batty y'know."

"Yeah," I agreed. "She gave me Dainty Dinahs for nothing." I began to walk away when I heard this tiny cough behind me. I looked around and Jennifer was wearing an indignant expression and her arm was extended.

"You'll have to hold my hand," she said. "I don't want to get lost." I smiled. I knew this must be some kind of a joke. But her face was quite still and her hand remained outstretched. I thought and thought for over a minute. When I turned to walk away she began to cry and she looked just like her grandmother. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. The street was empty except for way down the bottom two men with surveyor's poles were unwinding the longest tape measure I'd ever seen.

"Shall they pull Granny's house down today?" she asked.

"Of course not," I said. "Come on. But you let go as soon as we see anybody." We wended our way up Black Road at a dawdling pace so that we would not catch up to the other kids and I would not be seen holding Jennifer's hand. At Mrs. Longstop's shop we detoured and walked behind the houses until we got to the junction with Baltic Terrace. I peeked carefully around the corner.

"Won't we be late?" asked Jennifer.

"Mebbe." At nine sharp Mrs. Trout walked out onto the playground and jangled the brass school bell. I imagined the kids running to line up for class.

"It's the bell!" said Jennifer in panic. She gave a tug at my hand but I was having none of it. I'd far rather risk being late than suffer the jibes of my pals if they knew I'd escorted a girl to school. I counted the agonising minutes until I thought everyone would be inside school, then I hauled a surprised Jennifer into the open and made a bolt across the road. Once across, I let go of her hand and shoved her through the girl's gate. It was cruel but what could I do? I ran around to the boy's entrance and just tagged on to the tail end of the queue.

“Nearly late, Philip,” said Mrs. Trout, in a disapproving tone.

“Nearly, Miss.” After morning prayers we all sat down on the class-wide benches behind the long wooden desks. It was Monday and the first lesson was to be composition. Normally the pencils were given out by Beaker, who was at the front of the class ready and waiting. He looked at Mrs. Trout with cocker spaniel eyes and a sickening, goofy expression. Just then the door opened from the infant class and Miss Macardle, the headmistress, walked in with Jennifer Mountjoy in tow. I just knew it meant trouble.

“Good morning, Standard One.” The whole class stood up and replied with the usual greeting.

“Good morning, Miss Macardle.”

“This is a new girl who will be with us for a while. Her name is Jennifer Mountjoy,” then she turned to Beaker and broke his heart.

“William, I think today we’ll let Philip hand out the pencils.” Beaker sat down, devastated, and I looked on in disbelief. The headmistress beamed at me.

“Philip was kind enough to bring Jennifer to school this morning,” she said. All my pals turned to look at me. I was beet-red. Could this really be happening? What had I done to deserve this? I could not imagine that anyone ever in the history of time had been as embarrassed as I was at that moment. Surely it could get no worse.

“And,” she went on. “Jennifer tells me he held her hand the whole way.”

from The King Street Kids